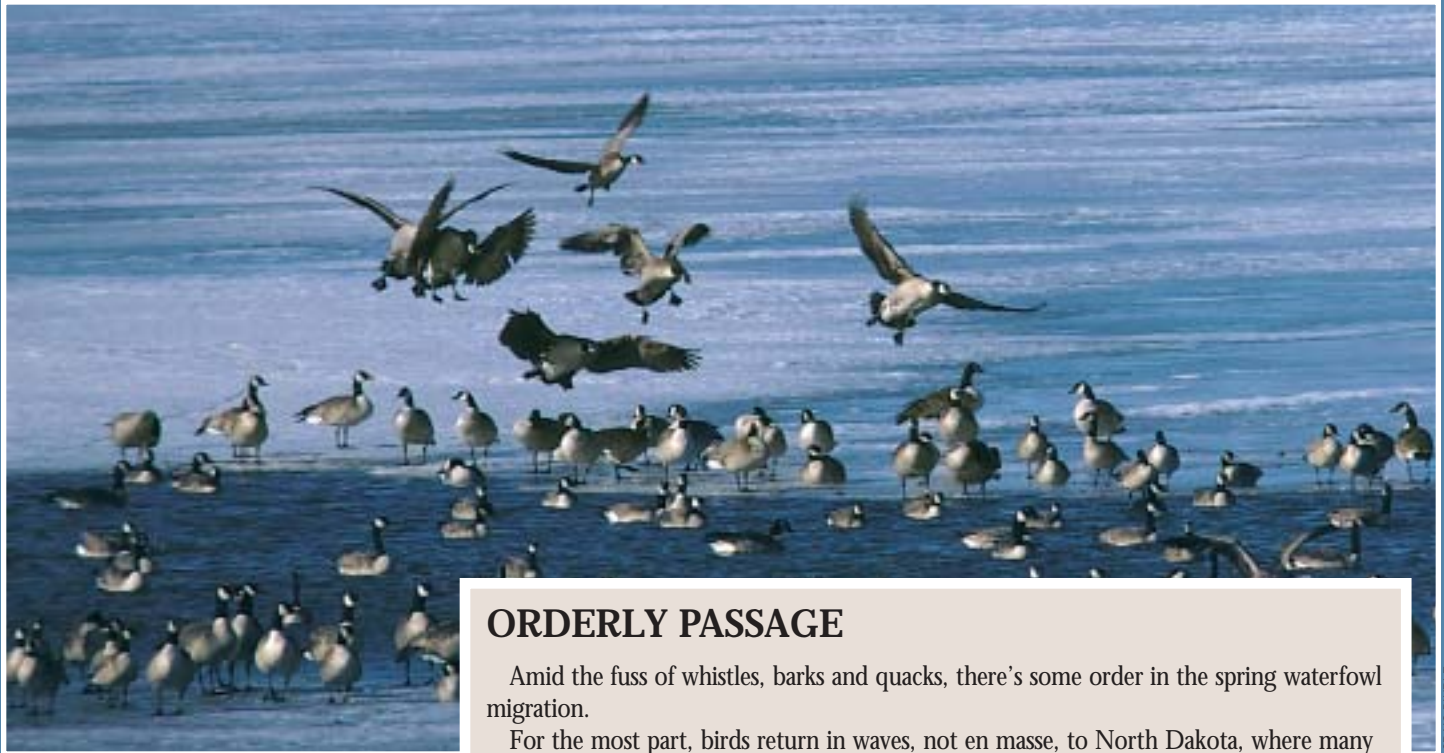


A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



Canada geese

ORDERLY PASSAGE

Amid the fuss of whistles, barks and quacks, there's some order in the spring waterfowl migration.

For the most part, birds return in waves, not en masse, to North Dakota, where many will nest and raise young, or continue their migrations elsewhere. "Canada geese are the first to arrive, and there are usually some mallards with them," said Mike Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department game management section leader.

Then again, there are winters when some Canada geese – and mallards, too – don't go anywhere, choosing instead to winter here. These larger birds are able to withstand the cold temperatures, and find enough open water and food to survive our leanest months.

"Some birds stay as far north as they can," Johnson said. "They don't want to go any farther from where they'll nest than they have to." Of the mallards that stay, most are bigger-bodied males that lose, because of their size, less body heat.

Following Canada geese and mallards to North Dakota, typically, are pintails, snow geese, scaup and others. Blue-winged teal are one of the latest arrivers as their journey, for one, starts from as far south as South America.

"Mallards, pintails and Canada geese are the first to nest, which is why they are the first to arrive," Johnson said. "Mallards won't start nesting, for example, until sometime in late April, but they get here earlier to set up their territories."

The spring migration for many species isn't as hurried as the fall passage. In fall, birds rely on fat reserves to carry them long distances, but arrive on wintering grounds spent as those reserves have been depleted. In spring, with nesting territories to defend and eggs to lay, birds stop and eat often to be fully-fueled upon arrival.

"The spring migration is made up of short little hops as the waterfowl work their way north a little at a time," Johnson said.

Why some birds bring up the rear of the spring migration has to do with timing. It doesn't pay for blue-winged teal, for example, to push the snowline because their invertebrate food source is under ice. Geese and mallards, on the other hand, can eat waste grains while waiting for spring.

To get here, evidence shows, the birds navigate by using stars, sunlight, landscape, earth's magnetic field and other cues. A strong sense to return "home" helps, too.

"There is a strong homing instinct to nest in the same area year after year, especially with Canada geese and mallards," Johnson said. "We've seen mallard hens nest in the same nest bowl as the previous year."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota *OUTDOORS*.